

# **FACTS ABOUT ESTABLISHING PATERNITY**



**The Division of Child Support Enforcement has district offices located across the state, serving every city and county. For the address and phone number of the child support enforcement office serving you, see the list on the website or call:**

**1 – (800) 468-8894  
(National toll free number)**



**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES  
Division of Child Support Enforcement  
730 East Broad Street  
Richmond, VA 23219-1849**

**An Equal Opportunity Agency**

**032-01-944/2 (4/2000)**

*Children deserve support from both parents.  
There is a legal obligation for parents to support their children.*

## **WHAT IS PATERNITY?**

Paternity means fatherhood. Establishing paternity means legally determining the father of a child. Establishing paternity means that the father's name can be placed on the child's birth certificate and that he has legal responsibility for the child.

## **WHY IS ESTABLISHING PATERNITY IMPORTANT?**

Every child deserves the financial and emotional support of both a mother and a father.

Establishing paternity provides **personal benefits** for a child, such as:

- ◆ **Self esteem.** Children respond to love and support from both parents. Children gain a sense of belonging and benefit from knowing that both parents care for them. They need to know who their father is and that he cares about them.
- ◆ **Family identity.** When children know they are part of a family, they are likely to be more secure about who they are and where they come from. Establishing paternity identifies the father's side of the family and may encourage contact with other family members, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, or other relatives. It also may give children the opportunity to learn about and appreciate their cultural heritage.
- ◆ **Shared parenting.** Parenting is the responsibility of both the father and the mother. Early paternity establishment may lead to involvement of the father in the child's life. More resources are likely to be available to a child supported by two parents.
- ◆ **Health history.** Establishing paternity completes the child's health history. It is important for children--and their doctors--to know the family's medical history, particularly genetic traits or histories of conditions or diseases.

Establishing paternity creates a **legal relationship** between the father and the child.

- ◆ Establishing paternity is required for the father to be legally responsible for child support.
- ◆ Establishing paternity is a necessary first step if the father requests visitation rights.
- ◆ Establishing paternity may provide legal benefits for the child, such as:
  - A share of social security, disability, or veteran's benefits if the father dies or becomes disabled;
  - Rights to any inheritance from the father;
  - Rights to medical or insurance benefits.

## **IS HAVING A CHILD SUCH A BIG DEAL?**

**YES!** There is no responsibility, joy, or honor greater than parenthood. Parenthood means providing love, care, and guidance, as well as food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. Paternity establishment shares the responsibility for a child between the mother and the father. Taking responsibility for your child may mean the difference between your child's relying on public assistance or being self-sufficient. Even if the parents are not married to each other, both parents must support their child until he or she becomes an adult.

## **HOW IS PATERNITY ESTABLISHED?**

Both parents can acknowledge paternity voluntarily. Both parents only need to sign an Acknowledgment of Paternity (AOP) form under oath. The most convenient place to sign the AOP is at the hospital before the mother and child are discharged. This is a free service offered by all birthing hospitals and requires that the father present a photo ID to the birth registrar before he signs the form.

Establishing paternity at the hospital gives a child a legal father immediately and insures that the child's original birth certificate includes the father's name.

If parents are unable to establish paternity at the hospital, the AOP form is available by visiting or calling the Office of Vital Records in Richmond, local health department clinics, local departments of social services, and local child support offices.

## **GENETIC TESTS**

Paternity can also be established by genetic testing to prove the identity of the father.

### **HOW ARE GENETIC TESTS DONE?**

The court or DCSE will schedule the man for testing in the area where he lives. The mother and child will be scheduled for testing in the area where they live. The samples are sent to a laboratory where they are tested. The test takes only a few minutes, and the results are usually available in three to four weeks.

### **HOW ACCURATE ARE THE GENETIC TESTS?**

Under Virginia law, test results of 98% or higher are reliable enough to prove paternity.

### **WHO PAYS FOR THE GENETIC TESTS?**

When DCSE arranges for testing, if the tested man is found to be the father, he will be required to pay for his test, the mother's test, and the child's test. If the tested man is not found to be the father, DCSE will pay for the tests.

## **CHILD'S BIRTH CERTIFICATE**

### **WHAT LAST NAME FOR THE CHILD CAN BE PLACED ON THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE?**

The mother may place any last name she wishes on the birth certificate. If both parents sign an Acknowledgment of Paternity form, they may indicate how the child's name should appear on the birth certificate. If the parents cannot agree, then the person wanting the change must petition the court for an order to that effect.

### **WHAT HAPPENS IF THE MOTHER IS MARRIED TO SOMEONE OTHER THAN THE BIOLOGICAL FATHER OF THE CHILD?**

According to Virginia law, the husband of the mother is presumed to be the legal father of her child. If the mother is married or was married up to ten months prior to the birth of the child to someone other than the biological father of the child, paternity must be established in court. Paternity may not be established by voluntarily signing an AOP form.

## **CUSTODY AND VISITATION**

Under most circumstances, when a child is born to unmarried parents, the child lives with the mother and the mother has legal custody of the child.

### **WHEN PATERNITY IS ESTABLISHED, CAN THE FATHER VISIT THE CHILD?**

Paternity establishment and visitation rights are two separate issues. When the mother agrees, the father may visit the child. Once paternity is established, the father may seek visitation rights through the court if the mother is unwilling to allow him to visit.

## **WHEN PATERNITY IS ESTABLISHED, CAN THE FATHER ASK FOR CUSTODY OF THE CHILD?**

Paternity establishment and custody are two separate issues. The father may ask the court to review the custody arrangements at any time after paternity is established. *Courts do not change custody unless there is proof that it is in the best interest of the child.* The courts may also consider joint or shared custody.

## **CAN THE FATHER TAKE CUSTODY OF THE CHILD INSTEAD OF MAKING SUPPORT PAYMENTS?**

No. The father may ask the court to review the custody arrangements at any time after paternity is established. *Courts do not change custody unless there is proof that it is in the best interest of the child.*

## **OUT-OF-STATE**

Paternity should be established for a child even if one parent lives or is planning to live in another state.

## **WHAT HAPPENS IF ONE PARENT IS OUT-OF-STATE?**

States have an agreement which allows the child support enforcement agency to assist the mother in proving who the father is even if he lives in a different state. The agreement among states also covers collecting child support from non-custodial parents in other states. If the parents live in different states, establishing paternity will take longer. Each state operates under the same basic guidelines, but the processes and time frames vary from state to state.

## **AGE OF THE FATHER**

### **WHAT IF THE FATHER IS NOT 18 YEARS OF AGE?**

A man can be named as the father on the child's birth certificate regardless of his age, but only the court can determine paternity and order the father to help the mother support the child if he is under 18 years old. Paternity can be established by the court for fathers as young as 14 years old.

## **CITIZENSHIP**

### **DO WE HAVE TO BE U.S. CITIZENS TO ESTABLISH PATERNITY FOR OUR CHILD?**

No. Paternity establishment does not have anything to do with your citizenship status. Paternity can be established using the Acknowledgment of Paternity form for any child born in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

### **WHO CAN GET INFORMATION FROM THE PATERNITY FORM?**

The information on your Acknowledgment of Paternity form is confidential. Only the Office of Vital Records & Health Statistics in the Department of Health and the Division of Child Support Enforcement have access to the information. No other federal or state agency can get this information.



## **CHILD SUPPORT**

DCSE is not involved with the family unless one parent applies for services. Either parent may apply for assistance.

### **ONCE PATERNITY IS ESTABLISHED, DOES THIS MEAN ONE PARENT MUST PAY CHILD SUPPORT?**

Both parents are expected to support their child. The non-custodial parent (the parent the child does not live with) is expected to pay child support. If one parent is not sharing the responsibility for supporting the child, the other parent may apply to Division of Child Support Enforcement for assistance. The amount paid by the non-custodial parent will be based on both parents' earnings.

### **TO FIND OUT MORE INFORMATION OR TO APPLY FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES:**

Contact your local DCSE office. Telephone numbers and addresses of local DCSE offices are listed on the inside front and back covers of this booklet.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FROM FATHERS**

### **WHAT HAPPENS IF I DON'T ADMIT PATERNITY?**

There may be a court hearing to decide if you are the father based on evidence that you and the mother provide. Paternity must be proven based

on clear and convincing evidence. The judge may order you to take a genetic test. If this happens, both the mother and the child will also be ordered to do so. Based on the results, the judge will make the final determination of whether you are the father.

### **WHAT RIGHTS DO I HAVE IF THERE IS A COURT HEARING?**

You have the right to a genetic test and the right to arrange for a lawyer to represent you.

### **THE MOTHER SAID SHE WAS USING BIRTH CONTROL, SO I DO NOT THINK I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR THE PREGNANCY. WHY DO I HAVE TO PAY?**

It does not matter whether you agreed to the pregnancy or whether you or the mother were using birth control. Legally, you are responsible for supporting the child if you are proven to be the father.

### **I'M NOT SURE I'M THE FATHER. WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

You may request genetic tests to prove conclusively whether you are the father or not. Contact your local child support office.

### **IF I BELIEVE I AM THE FATHER, CAN I APPLY FOR CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES TO ESTABLISH PATERNITY?**

Yes, either parent can apply for DCSE services. If paternity is established, a support order will be pursued to provide support for the child unless DCSE services are terminated.

### **I AM STILL IN SCHOOL AND HAVE NO MONEY. WHY SHOULD PATERNITY BE ESTABLISHED? DO I HAVE TO PAY CHILD SUPPORT?**

Establishing paternity at birth, or as early as possible, protects your child.

The father is responsible for supporting his child even if he is a student and regardless of his age. A judge will look at the father's age and income if he

is working while in school and will decide how much he must pay. The judge may order the father to find a job before or after school to provide some child support. If he does not, then when the father has an income in the future he will be required to pay support.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS FROM MOTHERS**

### **HOW DO I ESTABLISH PATERNITY?**

Contact the DCSE district office that serves your area. You will be asked to provide information related to your pregnancy and sign a form naming the man you believe to be the father of your child. DCSE can ask the alleged father to admit paternity voluntarily or to submit voluntarily to genetic testing to establish paternity with certainty. DCSE can also help you gather evidence to present in court at a paternity hearing.

### **DO I HAVE TO NAME THE CHILD'S FATHER AND ESTABLISH PATERNITY IN ORDER TO GET BENEFITS?**

Yes. If you want to receive benefits such as TANF or Medicaid, you have to name the child's father.

### **DO I HAVE TO NAME THE FATHER AND ESTABLISH PATERNITY TO GET BENEFITS IF I AM AFRAID HE WILL HURT ME OR THE CHILD?**

You may not have to have paternity established if you can prove you have a good reason for not giving the father's name. Talk to your local social services worker if you have this concern. The child support office cannot collect child support if paternity is not established.

## **WHAT IF I'M NOT SURE WHO THE FATHER IS?**

DCSE can help you find out who the father is. You will be asked some personal questions about who may be the father, but the questions are not meant to embarrass you. They are necessary to help you prove who the father is. DCSE will contact a potential father to ask if he will agree to genetic testing to determine if he is the father. If he does not voluntarily cooperate, he will be ordered to have genetic tests.

## **DO I NEED TO ESTABLISH PATERNITY IF THE FATHER AND I ARE GETTING ALONG AND HE IS HELPING ME SUPPORT MY CHILD?**

Yes. Even if the father agrees to help support the child now, he may change his mind or become disabled or die. Some benefits are available to the child only if paternity has been established.

## **I AM GOING TO MARRY SOMEONE ELSE. HE IS GOING TO ADOPT MY CHILD. WHY ESTABLISH PATERNITY?**

Plans to marry sometimes change. Adoptions take time. Your child is entitled to child support in the meantime. Ask DCSE for information on establishing paternity if you plan an adoption.